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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000543

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SUBJECT: VATICAN LOOKS TOWARDS CHINA - WITHOUT COMPROMISE

REF: A) VATICAN 541, B) VATICAN 512, C) BEIJI NG 17460, D) TAIPEI 3796

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CLASSIFIED BY: Fleur Cowan, Political Officer, POL, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

11. (U) The Holy See has sent clear messages to China recently that hint at improving relations, but which maintain the integrity of its position on religious freedom and autonomy. Both Pope Benedict XVI and Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano expressed displeasure at Beijing's intransigence on travel approval for Chinese bishops invited to Rome for an international meeting of bishops, and over lack of religious freedom in China. The Vatican-affiliated Community of Sant'Egidio, active in dialogue with the Chinese, told us that their contacts had "frozen" after the synod controversy. At the same time, the Holy See expressed its hope for change in China and reiterated its readiness to reestablish diplomatic relations. U.S. support for Vatican-Chinese relations was highlighted by Italian and Vatican-based media coverage of President Bush's statements during his recent visit to Beijing (ref A). End summary.

CLEAR MESSAGES FOR CHINA

12. (U) In late October, Pope Benedict XVI closed a three-week meeting of representatives of the world's bishops by lamenting China's ban on four bishops traveling to Rome. After greeting the Chinese bishops in absentia in the name of all Catholic bishops, Benedict said he was pained by their absence from the October 2-23 synod. The pontiff also expressed his closeness to the Chinese bishops, their priests and people. Benedict assured them that he felt "the road of suffering" of the Catholic Church in China, assigned to the bishops' pastoral care. The bishops attending the synod wrote jointly to the four absent Chinese bishops, expressing hope for the unity of the Catholic Church in China. The Holy See released the text on October 23.

13. (C) Representatives from the Vatican-affiliated Community of Sant'Egidio, active in dialogue with the Chinese on religious freedom issues, told us in mid November that their contacts had "frozen" after the synod controversy. They confirmed that the Chinese "didn't appreciate" the way the pope invited the Chinese bishops to the synod, apparently without due consultation with behind-the-scenes contacts. The Community's academic contacts and those with some access to the government interrupted contact almost immediately, apparently reflecting the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) Vice Chair Liu Bainian's unhappiness

with the situation as reported in ref C.

¶4. (U) Vatican Secretary of State (PM equivalent) Cardinal Angelo Sodano, for his part reaffirmed the Holy See's well-known readiness to move its embassy from Taipei to Beijing the moment diplomatic relations with China are resumed. Speaking to reporters October 25 on the sideline of the opening of a new convention center at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Sodano said the Holy See was continuing its outreach to Beijing but stressed that religious freedom must be guaranteed as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Sodano expressed the hope that "the sun of freedom would rise on this great country [China]," saying that governments had no right to tell people how they were to express their faith. Reflecting on Beijing's refusal to allow Chinese bishops to attend the synod, the Secretary of State said he believed the situation would improve

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with time. The Gregorian was a particularly apt venue for the subject as the convention center is named for famed Jesuit Missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) who was renowned in China for his understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture.

UNDERGROUND VS PATRIOTIC CHURCH

¶5. (U) In another development, a recent edition of Jesuit bi-monthly "Civiltà Cattolica" published a Holy See-approved article on closer Sino-Holy See relations. The author, Jesuit priest Hans Waldenfels, proposed that the Holy See should no longer name bishops for the so-called "underground" Catholic Church, saying it was standard procedure for Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) or "official" Church bishops to seek Holy See approval prior to their ordination. Waldenfel wrote that Chinese leaders wanted solutions to the historical standoff with the Holy See and that "new possibilities were opening up." One sticking point is the intransigence of the "underground" Church in some provinces. These long-suffering Catholics cannot readily forget decades of persecution and are reluctant to accept "jointly approved" bishops. The synod bishops were likely referring to this situation when they called for more visible unity among China's Catholic communities.

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¶6. (C) Holy See China country director Monsignor Gianfranco Rota Graziosi provided an alternate view in a recent conversation with us, commenting that the CPCA also undermines unity between the churches. Rota Graziosi said, "Unity will take time, as the patriotic church doesn't want to give up any control over the appointment of bishops." He emphasized that it was in the Chinese government's interest to keep the Catholic church divided between underground and CPCA branches, and that any "visible unity" was a threat to the government's power. Rota Graziosi noted that underground bishops have reported being approached by Chinese police who have encouraged them to be recognized by the CPCA, and thus protected. He said that the underground bishops have declined the offer.

¶7. (U) Not all signs on Catholic unity in China were bleak. Bishop Joseph Zen of Hong Kong addressed the Pope and assembled bishops at the synod, and in a post-synod interview with the Rome office of the U.S. bishops' news agency, said the recent ordinations of Chinese bishops with the explicit approval of both the Holy See and Beijing were "a breakthrough" in relations. Sant'Egidio representatives told us that the steady blurring of the line between the two churches would eventually change the dynamic of the situation. Zen said that some 85 percent of government approved bishops had been reconciled with the Holy See, and that Chinese authorities had to accept the fact that for Catholics, unity with the Holy See was not a political alliance but "simply religious business."

TAIWAN: WE ARE THE VICTIMS

¶8. (C) As for the Taiwan end of the equation, Zen said Oct 31 he thought it was "unreasonable" for the Vatican to break ties with Taiwan before talks with Beijing begin on normalising Sino-Vatican relations. Still, no one doubts that if and when relations between China and the Vatican are normalized Taiwan will be the loser. Rota Graziosi noted that although it was "very sad for the Taiwanese church, they must make this sacrifice."

¶9. (C) Though the Vatican has promised continuing formal relations with Taiwan, it is cold comfort to Taiwanese Ambassador Chou-seng Tou who can't help but resent the situation even if he understands the political realities involved. He believes that there will be no improvement in diplomatic relations between China and the Holy See, "any time soon" because China is unlikely to make the minimum concessions necessary on religious freedom. In a November 23 interview with Vatican-based media he noted that rather than releasing prisoners before President Bush's recent visit, the Chinese arrested several priests and seminarians. Echoing James Huang's comments (ref D), Tou also underlined the political importance of the Vatican-Taiwan diplomatic relationship, noting that, "the Holy See is the only European nation with which we still have relations~ the Vatican is very important to us." He went on, "We are somewhat the victims of the Holy See's strong desire for rapprochement with the mainland." emphasizing, "We're the victims, but we also understand," he concluded.

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) While Benedict XVI's and Cardinal Sodano's words were seen by some as a setback for Sino-Holy See relations, they were also a show of strength in the face of what the Vatican regards as Chinese intransigence and violations of religious liberty. We recall here the Holy See's 1999 canonization of 120 Chinese saints on the same day that China was celebrating 50 years of communist rule. The 1999 show of strength came after Beijing's previous refusal to allow two bishops to attend a 1998 meeting of the world's bishops. Rota Graziosi noted that Cardinal Sodano's language is virtually the same five years later. While seeking better relations with China, the Holy See will not compromise on the principle of religious freedom and its own autonomy and will continue to make this clear to the Chinese. The Holy See hopes that this recipe will combine with the positive developments noted above to inch the two sides ever closer. In the Vatican's view it all depends on the Chinese, and as Vatican-based China watcher Fr. Bernardo Cervellera told us recently, echoing Chinese Politburo member Jia Qinglin (reftel C), "they aren't ready yet." End comment.
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